Dek Unu Magazine
February 2025

In Lieu of Flowers

Laurie Peek

Cover: *For Sally* © Laurie Peek

Eleven

This is *Dek Unu Magazine*. In Esperanto, dek unu means "eleven." Eleven images from a single artist. Eleven artists in eleven solo issues in each publication year. Dek Unu publishes the work of a new artist-photographer in each issue. The artist's work and words are featured in individual focus as the sole purpose for each issue of the magazine. Unlike other arts and letters magazines which might look for work from a variety of artists to support an editorial staff's theme, at Dek Unu, theme and imagery are always each artist's own.

This Month

As convenient as a Kindle may be, for certain readers there's undeniably "something about holding a book in your hands" that enriches the experience of reading. As remarkable as digital photos are, photographers of a certain disposition firmly believe that it's only finished art when it's printed, preferably matted and framed, ready for gallery walls. The image fixed on a tangible medium is the one that brings the right aesthetic experience to the story. Similarly, though the modern digital studio is amazing, certain photographers know that physical media and occult chemical processes are where the challenges and the creative possibilities are. Laurie Peek, with "In Lieu of Flowers," shows she's one of those photographers.

Peek has done everything photographic: newspaper, event, documentary, marketing, from the very personal to the very public, but at this point in a highly-eventful life and career, she's focused on fine art photography, alternative processes, and a high-touch, painterly approach to her work. "In Lieu of Flowers" offers lyrical abstractions, hand-crafted marvels, composite concoctions quite literally grown in and assembled from her own garden. Originally the project was part of her recovery from personal loss. It has become an offering to others, in lieu of flowers, memorializing feelings for which words are quite inadequate. These images are decorative without being trite, emotionally-loaded without sentimentality, and possessed of the unity in variety that is a grail for artists of all persuasions. Ansel Adams said that a photograph is usually looked at – seldom looked into. Laurie Peek's portfolio invites and rewards a long linger, and a return visit.

There was a rose that faded young;
I saw its shattered beauty hung
  Upon a broken stem.
I heard them say,
What need to care,
With roses budding everywhere?"
  I did not answer them.

There was a bird brought down to die;
They said, "A thousand fill the sky—
  What reason to be sad?"
There was a girl whose lover fled;
I did not wait the while they said,
  "There's many another lad."

"Solace" by Dorothy Parker

For Sally

The images of *In Lieu of Flowers* are for my mother, Sally, my son Jackson, and others I've known whose funerals I was not able to attend, as well as for all those who've suffered the loss of a loved one, especially the loss of a child. These images are the "flowers" I didn't send.

The bits of poetry paired with each of these artworks come from my maternal grandmother Loraine S. Bradford's poetry journal. She was an army general's wife and a published poet herself. I was named after her. Reading through her 206-page journal to find extracts to accompany my photos was a revelation. My grandparents only visited once a year, so I didn't know her well, but, from the poetry she both clipped out of magazines and hand transcribed, I've gleaned that she was quite a Romantic individual. Matching the poetry she cherished with my photos adds another layer to the tribute for lost loves and family that my *In Lieu of Flowers* project represents.

Blossoms of the plum
Gleam thru fallen snow today,
Better let them stand!
I had gathered some for you—
But they melted in my hand.

From "Tanka" by unknown Japanese
author translated by Eunice Lietyeus

For Gerald

Thick lie the shadows of the flowers on the floor
of the Jasper Pavilion.
Many times have I told the little boy but he
does not sweep them away.
No sooner does the setting sun remove
them
Than a bright moon comes and throws
them down again.

Su Shih, translated by Alan Simms Lee

For Diane

A sickle moon hung in a blue-green sky,
A twisted tree etching the sunset's gold
A twilight wind, rustling the dead leaves by,
And sudden night, star-decked and purple-stoled.

"Autumn Dusk" by Medora Addison

For Stephen

I shall come back at some remembering hour,
Another self among these ruined things,
Noting the late sun on the empty tower,
The slow dusk and the dead, round moon it brings,
And how all this is beautiful and sad,
Like some old tale…not the sharp grief I had.

From "New Sorrow" by David Morton

For Lara

Now, this anonymous dust
That once was petal and wing
Or the slender hand of a girl—
Some brief and shapely thing—
Has kept no delicate print
Or pattern to know it by,
Here where it levels and dulls
Blank to the vacant sky.

From "Out of the Dust" by David Morton

For Laura

In your furled petals what ghosts
Of blue headlands and seas,
What profound immortal breath
        Sighing
of Greece

Adelaide Crapsey

For Debra

Bright splendor of the flaming trees:
Is this thy choice, my heart?
Passion of crimson, scarlet, gold: like these
Wilt thou too play thy part?
Burning—then burnt; blown leaves and lost,
And all the boughs left bare to wind and frost.
Lost leaves are they, burnt, blown afar,
Bare boughs and desolate they are.

From "Alternatives" by Mrs. Schuyler Van Rensselaer

For Aaron

Open my eyes to visions girt
With beauty, and with wonder lit—
But let me always see the dirt,
And all that spawn and die in it.

From *A Poet's Prayer* by Louis Untermeyer

For Keith

So still she lies in this closed place apart
Her feet grown fragile for the ghostly tryst;
Her pulse no longer striking in her wrist
Nor does its echo wander through her heart.

Over the body and the quiet head
Like stately ferns above an austere tomb,
Soft hairs blow; and beneath her armpits bloom
The drowsy passion flowers of the dead.

"The Flowering Corpse" by Djuna Barnes

For Melissa

The countless vagaries of maple leaves,
The gaudy humbleness of flowers and weeds,
The hill, a placid stoic to all creeds,
They use an obvious language that deceives
The subtle theories of human ears.
They are the futuristic poets of time:
Their tongue is motion and they scorn the rhyme
And metre made by men to sooth theirs fears.

From "Landscape" by Maxwell Bodenheim

For Ellen

Artist Interview - Laurie Peek

There is a deeply moving backstory to this project. Please share what happened?

In the summer of 2020, my son Jackson drowned in a swimming pool in Mexico. It was during covid so there was no funeral; we had his cremains shipped home to us. This was a devastating loss, and I took a year off to grieve and try to recover. At the end of that year off, my series "In Lieu of Flowers" poured out of me, and I suddenly started working like a demon. It seemed as though I was channeling my son's creativity!

Laurie Peek

It began as a tribute to my son and other folks I've known who died whose funerals I wasn't able to attend, including my own mother's. When I ran out of names of people I personally knew, I started using the names of local people who died too soon. I donate a portion of my sales to The Compassionate Friends organization, a support group for families whose child has died. These were the flowers I was not able to send.

Working on "In Lieu of Flowers" and a new chapter "The Way Home" has been healing and is meant to heal and comfort others. Creating something beautiful and celebrating these lost

lives has given me a sense of agency and purpose I wasn't expecting. Born of grief, the work is so far my finest, no doubt because it is so heartfelt.

In Lieu of Flowers is a VERY "alt-" take on botanical photography. How do you describe the evolution of the process?

The isolation of covid times kept me at home working with the plants in my garden. Combining gilding with some alternative processes I'd been experimenting with, in combination with practicing East Asian brush painting and collage, brought me to a whole new place from my previous photography. Now my work is even more abstract, lyrical, and hand-made. A real discovery for me was gilding on vellum which I learned from photographer Dan Burkholder.

My process for making my digital composites isn't complicated but it does take patience and serendipity. Using various apps, I combine, say, two to as many as six images as I comb through my archive for just the right combination. For me it's an absorbing treasure hunt! Using trial and error, I keep adding new layers with varying translucencies and treatments until I have a result that pleases me. I create with what I have at hand instead of finding it out there. I sometimes think I'm really just a wanna-be painter using photographs instead of paint!

Your image, "For Diane," is an example of a complex of parts that work together beautifully. Describe how you built it?

"For Diane" is probably made up of four different images, including at least one shot on a lightpad and one with strong shadows that was shot outside. I sometimes incorporate alternative process images I've made like cyanotypes, anthotypes, and lumens. I also like to mix black and white layers with colored layers and invert images for an "illustration" effect. I then typically print the digital composite

image on semi-translucent vellum and gild it on the back with gold- or silver-toned metallic leaf. Meditatively rubbing the leaf on and then varnishing the final image front and back gives the image a shimmering glow that is best appreciated in person and makes me think of sacred art. People often don't even realize they're looking at a photograph!

You've lived, studied, and worked in plenty of different places, a woman with a past! Where was square one?

My parents moved to Sarasota, Florida in the early '50s. It was a marvelous place to grow up. We had a pool, a boat, and great freedom to roam and explore, both in my immediate neighborhood and along Sarasota's many beaches and waterways. I cannot forget the look and smells of subtropical Florida's lush vegetation – the oleander, hibiscus, sea grape, bougainvillea, jacaranda, and yellow trumpet trees. I do believe my interest in water reflections and botanical photography stems from those early years. Plus, Sarasota was a haven for artists and writers, as well home to the Ringling Museum where I took art classes.

At the beginning of 9th grade, my parents sent me to Ashley Hall, a boarding school in Charleston, South Carolina.

It was like a long slumber party with my best friends. There were excellent, inspirational teachers, particularly in English and History. I took art classes and soaked up the beauty and lore of that unique city. At a friend's I discovered Steichen's *The Family of Man* and we often went to foreign art films – the photographer in *Blow-up* made a big impression on me.

How did photography enter the picture?

I got interested in photography and art-making after hanging around with students from Rhode Island School of Design during the "Summer of Love" (1967) on Nantucket. Several of them were excellent photographers. Two summers later, I also hung out with them in Vermont where we had a converted cow barn that we turned into a temporary art gallery showing RISD student and faculty work. It was way cool! I also got turned on to Robert Frank's *The Americans* and Walker Evans' photographs.

At Vassar, I took an art history survey course, and then, after transferring to Antioch College, I took my first darkroom class in photography. That enabled me to do a work-study on Long Island in a commercial photography studio which gave me some basic skills in the darkroom. I spent a summer traveling in Europe, spending most of my days in museums soaking up the history of European art and taking pictures.

Returning to my home town, I attended New College and spent one semester studying at the University of Florida in Gainesville with photographer Doug Prince, who gave me encouragement. I observed his lifestyle (being paid to do your own work and teach at the same time) and thought, "Oh, I'd like to do that!"

Your photo training includes some of everything – workshops, university, independent study. An array of big name tutors!

At New College, I was lucky that a friend sold me a Hassleblad for cheap, so I had a great 2 1/4 format camera to work with. I soon moved to Boston with some school chums and started exploring the world of fine-art photography, taking a class with Kipton Kummler, showing Minor White my portfolio, and getting a job in the darkroom of a local commercial photographer, George Cushing, who did beautiful black-and-white work of all kinds. Later, I took a sabbatical from my job to attend a winter residency at Apeiron Workshop in Millerton, New York, where we had photographers Emmet Gowin, Paul Caponigro, Danny Lyon, and others teach for a week at a time. It was amazing!

From that experience I decided to enroll in a photography graduate program at the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, headed by Nathan Lyons, who had just recently left the George Eastman House to set up his own program a block away, with teachers like Syl Labrot, Carl Sesto, Todd Walker, and filmmaker Hollis Frampton. I was aware of the pioneering work of Betty Hahn and Bea Nettles. Now they are legends, but at the time, the photography scene was just starting to really take off, and everyone was very approachable.

I worked part-time at the George Eastman House, so I was able to spend time in their famous archive, soaking up the history of photography by looking at the original images. I was greatly influenced by their 1975 exhibition, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape*. Eastman House's ongoing film series of silent films and independent films (Jean-Luc Godard gave a talk, for example) was especially stimulating. I lit Gloria Swanson's cigarette!

And a big chunk of your skill developed on the job.

With my MFA in Photography under my belt, I was offered a job teaching photography at a private high school in Washington, D.C., which I did for two years. I then moved with my soon-to-be first husband to New York City where we were naively planning to get a loft and be "artists." It didn't exactly work out that way, but we did end up buying a house in Brooklyn, and I got a job as a researcher at Bettman Achive (now part of Getty Images) that set me up to become

Studio view

the librarian at Sygma Photo News, a French international news agency. I was trained by Kathy Ryan, who went on to be the Director of Photography for the *New York Times Magazine*. Seeing all the original photos the various Sygma photographers were sending in, I decided, "I can do this," and I started freelancing as a photographer, taking assignments at *City Limits*, *The Progressive, The Brooklyn Paper,* and *The Village Voice.*

What kind of assignments? Anything especially memorable?

I did all sorts of local happenings, "Man in the Street" interviews, crime reporting, and features. I did a documentary feature on the Love Canal pollution story. Among the most memorable was chasing down the city's "Ten Worst Landlords,"

one of whom tried to assault me in the courthouse for taking his picture!

I needed something more solid than local reporting and freelancing, so I took a job with the NYC Department of General Services as their staff photographer, traveling all over the city documenting city-owned properties and city-supported community gardens, as well as filling in for Mayor Ed Koch's photographer and providing photos for their annual report. Up until then, I was still shooting black-and-white film with my Olympus 35mm and developing everything in my basement darkroom in Brooklyn. Working for the city, my office and darkroom were in one of the "wedding cake" top towers of the municipal building. I had the entire floor all to myself! It was funky but with amazing 360 views of the city.

You took an extended break. What happened?

I unexpectedly got pregnant and, needing to take care of my child, I had to put my photography aside. My husband and I were held up at gunpoint (it was the early 1980s) right by our house in Brooklyn, so it wasn't a difficult decision to move to the safety of the suburbs where I again worked in a commercial photography studio part time while my son was in daycare. When my husband and I split up, I was a single mom and had to earn a decent living, so I got a job in sales and marketing for a creative production company in NYC. I eventually became Executive VP of the company. Although I put my photography career on the shelf to raise my expanded family of three boys with my second husband, I stayed very involved in crafting the creative event proposals and marketing materials for my company and our clients: BMW, Amex, KPMG, Goldman Sachs, Heineken.

Eventually, I gave up the commute and production company business to be an administrator for the Art Students League

Vylacil campus artists residency, which was ten minutes from my house. That was a valuable experience in managing an art gallery and facilitating exhibitions and PR for a public viewing of the residents' work every month.

When I finally stopped working for a salary, I was able to focus once more on my own personal photography and art-making. I've come full circle! In the beginning I felt like Rip Van Winkle so much had changed in the intervening 20-some years.

After years in NYC, these days you live upstate in the Hudson Valley. What's that like for you? For your art?

I live in an 1850 restored farm house in a historic New York hamlet about 20 minutes north of the George Washington Bridge, just above New Jersey on the western side of the Hudson River. The hamlet is known for being the place where Major Andre was hanged during the Revolutionary War for being a British spy.

After living in Manhattan and Brooklyn, I relish having a garden, a swimming pool, and my own studio out back. I have many friends in the arts here and have been active in various civic and environmental organizations. I do regularly meet with a group of female artists and curators to discuss our work and support one another. Currently I'm a also a member of the Soho Photo Gallery in Manhattan which brings me additional camaraderie and perspectives.

Over the years, Dek Unu Magazine has published a large number of female artists. Are you political? Feminist? Engaged?

In high school in South Carolina, in the early civil rights years, I became an ardent champion in my way. Older, living in the

city, and animated by the burning issues of the day, I decided I no longer wanted to pursue "fine art" because I wanted to "make a difference." Because I was involved in some organizations that were active in the city, I started documenting various protest movements, including police brutality, anti-nuke and anti-porn rallies, and other labor movements. When I took a photo of the transit workers' leader shaking hands with a NYC negotiator to end a big transit strike, a reporter from *Soho Photo News* said "I want that picture," so I started freelancing for them just before they folded. At the same time, I was working with a progressive political consultant who sent me around the country to photograph various politicians in action, which he turned into animated black-and-white political ads. Spending time with those folks running for office, I did come to appreciate how hard they work to get elected!

I am a feminist in the sense that I've always been interested in women, their role in history and their accomplishments. I grew up with three loving brothers and my boarding school experience at an all-girls school promoted strong bonding with females, so I've had the best of both worlds (if one is to dichotomize them into two polarities). I do feel strongly about pushing for more equity for women in the arts and other previously male-dominated fields.

With your variety of experiences and connections, are there teachers, mentors, or influences that need a shout out?

A number of folks in my past have been helpful. Photographer Doug Prince was encouraging when I was just starting out. Bev Cheuvront, my editor at *The Brooklyn Paper* was, and still is, super supportive. Dan Burkholder teaches an excellent class on gilding images. Ann Eder taught me some alternative

plant-based processes. And, of course, I have to mention my family, especially my husband, who shoulders way more than his rightful share of responsibilities, freeing me up to do my work.

At work, varnishing prints

Some depend on a gang for constructive criticism. Others dread judgment. How does "feedback" affect your work?

My work is pretty much done in private except for showing my husband and a few photographer friends my finished images and getting their feedback. That said, I might join a crit group at some point to see what happens. I've also been participating in a number of photo reviews, both in person and online, which has given me some productive ideas and opened up new opportunities.

I have gotten some useful feedback, but it's been more a matter of an accretion of comments, tweaks, and suggestions than any one big epiphany. It's gratifying when well-regarded

curators like Anne Tucker and Paula Tognarelli have bought photographs I showed them in a review.

Although my work is not for everyone, the response from those who are receptive has been super positive, which is validating. I am confident in what I'm doing. It doesn't really matter much to me if others appreciate it. I'm just driven to do this because it's inherently interesting and satisfying. It gives my life purpose. There's nothing like the thrill of making an image you love. I sometimes can't believe I made it, since my process is one of discovery, lucky accidents and playing around, rather than any rigorous methodology. With my current botanicals work, most of my raw material is right here in my own garden, no trips to exotic places or great exertions necessary! I do work hard, however, crafting new images and creating raw material for my image elements.

What kind of critic are you? Open to everything? Tough sell?

I definitely like to encourage and share with other artists. I did enjoy teaching high school kids, but I have no time for teaching now. I'm very eclectic in my tastes. I see a lot of really outstanding photography and art out there which is both daunting and inspiring. I'm not so into "identity" photography, although it's rather dominant right now. I'm more into abstraction, pure form, nature and mystery. I like work that has energy, humor, imagination, strangeness: Jessica Baukhaus, Meghann Reipenhoff, and Julie Blackmon are examples.

What's in the future. A new project? Travel? An upcoming show?

I do have lots of dreams and ambitions for where to take my work. Most recently, in addition to making the gilded prints 21.5" x 17.5" framed, I've been making larger 33" x 25" ungilded paper prints, framed edge-to-edge. Their greater size

creates a big impact, so I'm doing more of those. Letting things develop organically, while being persistent in pursuit of my goals, has been my approach. In mid-February, I'm in a two-person show at the Zakin Gallery in Demarest, New Jersey, and I have three solo shows lined up for 2025. I'll keep taking classes and doing reviews to expand my horizons. I have a lot of lost time to make up for!

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